

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Beginner's Mind

*For the ordination of Lauren Alexandra Smith
 to the Unitarian Universalist Ministry*

“In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind, there are few.” This is the wisdom of Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, beloved teacher and founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind, there are few.”

It is possible, even probable, that in more than ten years of a shared spiritual journey, Lauren and I have spent more hours together seated in silence than in conversation. We find in Zen Buddhism the perfect complement to Unitarian Universalism – not just the silence in relation to the boisterousness of our chosen faith, but a practice to cultivate beginner’s mind. Beginner’s mind is “empty” and “ready;” “if your mind is empty,” says Suzuki Roshi, “it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything.” Zen practice keeps everything fresh, especially the experience of the interdependent web, that soul-deep, in-the-bones knowledge that we are all kin. Beginner’s mind is “compassionate” and “boundless.”¹

Lauren, it is abundantly clear from the esteemed present company, this great cloud of witnesses you have gathered about you today, that the transmission of our faith and of its life in the world, through you, has been accomplished. Family and friends, teachers and mentors, parishioners and colleagues, your beloved husband Chris and Zen Master Ben, have all taken their turn in The Education of Lauren Alexandra. You are a consummate student – deliberate and deep and devoted. I think of Adrienne Rich’s *Transcendental Etude*, and know that you live her words profoundly:

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
 make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history

¹ *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, “Prologue,” pp. 21-22

or music, that we should begin
 with the simple exercises first
 and slowly go on trying
 the hard ones, practicing till strength
 and accuracy became one with the daring
 to leap into transcendence, take the chance
 of breaking down in the wild arpeggio
 or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.
 —And in fact we can't live like that: we take on
 everything at once before we've even begun
 to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
 in the midst of the hardest movement,
 the one already sounding as we are born.²

O, this movement is hard! Harder, still, is the terrible truth that practice does not make perfect; we are human. I know you, like me, get your heart broken over and over; usually, I don't make it past the front page of the morning paper without weeping. Yet I dread the day that tragedy and triumph don't make us weep. Then it will be time to do some other work, you know, something that doesn't require of us an open, broken heart.

Lauren, I proclaim with great pride and joy that the transmission between us has been accomplished – what my geekier friends might call the core dump of my ministry into yours. But suddenly, I realize that I don't know whether or not we've ever talked about something that we definitely should cover before you go soaring off the high dive and right into the heart of what some have called this impossible calling to which we now ordain you. The hour is late! But wait...

Let's frame it as a question; just this:

*What are the most important ways that your spiritual practice
 upholds your faith?*

The ways each of us answers this question with our lives, the ways we work out this *koan*, could make, as Robert Frost would say, “all the difference.”

What are the most important ways that your spiritual practice upholds your faith? The talking stick is in my hands; I'll start. I've already talked about beginner's mind. That's a spiritual practice, the practice of emptiness

² Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, 1977

and readiness. And I don't think we can talk about beginner's mind without talking about meditation, whether seated on the *zafu* or walking through the Boston Public Garden or the Berkeley Hills, or, for that matter, feeding the baby or driving to San Mateo. The Buddha said we can meditate seated, standing, walking, or lying down, and lying down might be just the ticket for you right about now! But I can hear my teacher commanding, "*Shinkantaza!*" - just sit! Don't complicate your meditation with choices; be choice-less. Come to rest in the space between breaths.

Beginner's mind and meditation - good spiritual practices for strong, sure faith. And then, the alpha and omega: *pay attention*. One of the reasons that paying attention is a bedrock spiritual practice is that in it, we will notice that everything changes.

We know that things change - that we can change our minds, and our hearts - but still, it surprises us. Learning to sit like a mountain gives us staying power; learning to pay attention and, especially, to pay attention with beginner's mind, will fuel our faith in that which abides, through all our changes.

And now arises the question under the question; just this:
What is this faith, Lauren, this faith to the practice of which we ordain you?

All of us here are called to the question, *What is your faith?*, and most important of all,

When I look at your life, can I know your faith?
When you look at my life, can you know my faith?

We are Unitarian Universalists; despite our love affair with the spoken language, at best, our faith is characterized by *show* much more than *tell*. And if *show* is greater than *tell*, I'll answer that, at best, the practice of our faith will *reveal* our faith. Once we're open and attentive and unshakable, what do we do? *We love. We serve.* Compassion doesn't even begin to describe the practice of our faith, because spiritual practice is all about getting that it's all *I*, and all *we*. To say, *Be kind* is to say *Be as kindred to all beings*. We need a directive with a little more urgency, though; time flies whether or not we're having fun, and the hour for humankind on this luminous planet is very, very late. Author Annie Dillard said this about writing, but let's substitute the word *love* for *writing*, and we'll have it:

“One of the few things I know about [love],” we’ll say, “is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place.... Something more will arise for later, something better.” And if that’s not enough to get us off of the sidewalk and into the streets, she adds a version of this: “Assume you [work with a congregation] consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case.... What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?”³

One answer is that we will speak of liberation. And Lauren, perhaps in a way that is more true of you than of any other Unitarian Universalist minister I have known, your ministry will be about *liberation*. At the turn of the last century, your forbears were founders of this Commonwealth, worshipped at First Parish in Cambridge and Follen Church in East Lexington, and gave birth to dreams for you: a beautiful mantle you wear well, and with which we formally charge you, today. Preaching and teaching and *living* liberation - especially, the free mind, the mind unbound - is a great trust that has been placed in you by the five generations of Black Americans from whom you have descended and on whose shoulders you stand today.

Beloved spiritual companion, I greet you now as a colleague.

Remember, you are possessed of a spiritual practice that will light a dark path.

Remember, you are possessed of a faith tradition
in a world that longs for its saving message,
of which you are the promise.

And remember, you are possessed of each and every one of us.

While this ordination is yours, dear Lauren - it marks you for prophetic witness and awakened leadership - it does not mark you, alone. All of us who love you and all whose lives your life will touch will uphold you in carrying on its meanings and responsibilities.

Bless your heart.
Amen.

³ *The Writing Life*

